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ABSTRACT

Using the educably mentally retarded clients can aid students' learning in the facilitation of an effective helping process. The practicum students appear to be less threatened in their initial contacts with such clients and yet, as a group, the mentally retarded present needs similar to all clients, e.g., adjustment in interpersonal relationships and self-esteem, problem solving ability, anxiety reduction, and educational and vocational plans. Undergraduate rehabilitation students trained in the Carkhuff model and in characteristics of the mentally retarded were placed with institutionalized mentally retarded persons for the purpose of developing a facilitative helping process. The training procedures for the program, both didactic and experimental, are identified and described. (Author)

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An Initial Practicum Idea

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An Initial Practicum Idea

INTRODUCTION

It is an accepted practice that practicum is an essential aspect of a counselor training program. However, the question often arises regarding what type of initial experience is most beneficial for a novice counselor. It has been the present author's observation that inexperienced counselors are often fraught with feelings of self-doubt, self-consciousness, and ambiguity which may effect their overall effectiveness. Bordin (1968) stated that he finds many of the prevailing obstacles common in an initial experience are alleviated when the novice helper is placed with a client who has a great number of adjustment problems rather than a client whose adjustment problems are not as severe. He further mentions that the reason for exposing the student counselor to such a client is to have the novice counselor gain more confidence in his skills so that he is more alert and effective with less severe clients. Accordingly, these authors propose that educable mentally retarded clients represent an excellent target population for an initial practicum experience because they present multiple adjustment problems. Hence, it is the purpose of this article to describe the rationale for the practicum as well as didactic, and experiential components of the training program.

THE TRAINING PROGRAM

The training program is an undergraduate curriculum within the Psychology Department; the students complete a functional major in psychology with emphasis in rehabilitation. This degree requires about fifty semester hours in the major. The training program we use is basically the Carkhuff model. We spend a minimum of twenty hours in teaching the model, including facilitative responding, discrimination training, role playing, etc. In addition to the communication model specific didactic materials concerning mental retardation are covered. Although the term mental retardation connotes a wide range of behaviors we primarily concern ourselves with those individuals who are only moderately limited in their adpative skills. Since approximately 80% of all individuals diagnosed as mentally retarded fall into the educable range we devote the bulk of our attention to this group.

Teaching about mental retardation is important because most of the students fail to understand that the mentally retarded individual has counseling needs such as adjustment in interpersonal relations and self-esteem effective problem solving ability, anxiety reduction, and educational and vocational planning. Without this didactic information the potential helpers perceive the

educable mentally retarded client as lacking many of these emotional experiences, rather than sharing the same experiences as do normals. People seem to generalize the mentally retarded's deficiency in recorded IQ to limited emotional needs rather than seeing the mental retardation as just one dimension of an individual's total being. A practicum experience with these individuals thus must meet the affective dimension so prevalent in many counseling theories. If counseling is to be defined as that of a helper assisting the helpee in increasing his adaptive behaviors and the mentally retarded client has the same needs plus lesser intelligence, then the mentally retarded client appears to fit the multiple adjustment problems included in Bordin's definition of a preferred target population for an initial counseling experience.

SUBJECTS

Following the initial communications training model and information concerning the mentally retarded, the individual helper is placed with a helpee who is an educable mentally retarded person. Initial age ranges of clients were between 14 - 18 but subsequent populations range from 8 - 16 with a concentration on the lower age levels. Approximately five helping meetings lasting 30

to 45 minutes were conducted. Following each counseling session a critique of the session is done in order to help the student better understand himself as well as his client.

PURPOSES

This brief interaction serves a number of purposes: (1) the helper learns to understand what is to be accomplished in a helping relationship, (2) precise goals permit both the helper and the helpee to acknowledge change more easily, (3) the helper learns to deal with specific problems and, therefore, aids in helping the helpees increase their repertoire of behavior by developing means of attacking these goals, (4) the helper learns to deal with the affective needs of his clients and, therefore, allows the helper to explore an area that many persons have previously ignored when dealing with the mentally retarded, (5) the student helper gains an increased understanding and practice in the coordinating and delivering of services that are needed by an individual.

It has been our observation that by using the educable mentally retarded clients the helper has to demonstrate exceptionally good empathy and respect for the client. This is true because many of these helpees are extremely sensitive to rejection as a result of previous experiences

and, hence, will not enter into a helping situation if these conditions of empathy and respect are not met. They would further attempt to avoid future contacts with the helper. It seems to us that a primary suggestion to helpers that are working with helpees who are educably mentally retarded would be to create a counseling environment that allows the helpee to experience meaningful successes within an environment that has normally produced failure. Another aspect of the program that has seemed to benefit the student helpers is the constant awareness that they must model concreteness and be alert to the slightest of cues that the helpee is not understanding the mutual communications. Both Boland (1972) and Kolstoe (1972) state that individuals falling into the educable mentally retarded range function at no higher than Piaget's concrete operational level of intellectual development. Hence, the helper is forced to avoid the use of generalities so common in other initial practicum encounters; this results in the helper's constant awareness of concreteness modeling. Furthermore, since the helpee represents so many behavioral adjustments a student helper is usually successful in that he learns to identify a problem area and work with it. It also has been our experience that rapport building can generally be achieved quickly since many of the helpees we dealt with were institutionalized;

institutionalization may be a factor in the helpees' strongly expressed emotional needs to relate to someone who cares?

CONCLUSIONS

We feel that training in the Carkhuff model as well as in the characteristics of the mentally retarded can assist student helpers in learning to attend to affective as well as cognitive needs of his helpee. Furthermore, the helper learns to describe the clients problems in behavioral terms resulting in the understanding, coordination and subsequent implementation, of the services so essential for an effective developmental process.

Furthermore, the educable mentally retarded helpees gain from the facilitation of student helpers who implement the helping relationship judging from our own observations as well as from institutional feedback. As a result of this program we feel that both the helper and helpee have the opportunity to utilize their resources in the helping process as well as increasing their skills. In general, we have found the program to be very beneficial in the facilitation of the students' understanding and implementation of the helper process and, in particular, the rehabilitation process.

Hence, we present this application as an additional benefit to the counselor training education programs.

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